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ABSTRACT

Shirley Brice Heath's "Ways With Words," which deals with cultural differences and shows ways to negotiate a translation of culture, can be used to formulate a pedagogy which alerts students to cultural differences and encourages students to fit their own culturally inherited logical structures and personal styles into a rhetoric which also fulfills the requirements of academic exposition. According to H. P. Grice, there are two kinds of meaning: the semantic, abstract one, and the one intended by the speaker which must be recognized by the receiver of the message. Heath's research, carried out in two communities in the Carolinas, one black and one white, revealed: that an understanding of students' backgrounds can help them to be reached; and that a cultural heritage can be translated into the terms of a school's standards rather than being completely eradicated. At the college level, problems arise not only from the cultural differences of a heterogeneous student populace, but also from different conceptions of the function, the usage, and the beauty of language. When teachers of writing try to make students write correctly, the teacher may change a whole complex of beliefs, values and habits of mind, perhaps affecting profoundly the students' sense of identity. A better method might be to let the teacher be taught to a certain extent, to accept as much as to offer, to educate better writers by becoming a more receptive reader. (RAE)

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Pragmatics and the Teaching of Writing.

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Abstract.

Pragmatics is difficult to define, mainly because its domain crosses the traditional boundaries between disciplines. Simply put, it is the study of language in action. It covers the areas of deixis, conversational implicature, presuppositions, and speech-act theory. A special area of pragmatics is that of language learning.

Ways with Words by Shirley Brice Heath is the result of ten years of research which was aimed at solving the learning problems of students coming from two communities -- one white and one black -- in Piedmont, Carolinas. The book is especially valuable because Heath deals with cultural differences, and she shows that it is possible to negotiate a translation of culture. We tend to perceive the "ways with words" of other cultures (when they are using our own language) as either incorrect or artistic. We tend, also, to think that logic is universal, and that mastery of the vocabulary and grammar is enough for a person to speak and write exactly as we do. In correcting the students' grammar, tempering their "artistic" inclinations, we may achieve conformity while destroying an asset.

Informed by Heath's findings, I propose a pedagogy which: 1. aletrs the students to cultural differences. This is easiest with foreign students but applies to speakers of Black English as well. 2. encourages students to fit their own culturally inherited logical structures and personal styles into a rhetoric which also fulfills the requirements of academic exposition.

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This paper is supposed to show the relevance of a theory for the practical teaching of writing. My first task is the most difficult one. I have chosen to speak about pragmatics, and the difficulty consists not only in finding a brief formulations to explain what it is, but also in defining it as theory because pragmatics is, in many ways, an antitheory. The studies designated by the name are only remotely connected with the philosophical trend known as pragmatism. The term "pragmatics" was first used by philosopher Charles Morris to describe a branch of semiotics which studies the relationships between signs and interpreters. (Levinson, p. 1). This original usage of the word implies one of the main features of pragmatics, and the one that makes it interesting for a teacher of writing, namely, the attention to the role of the participants in the act of speech.

The definitions of pragmatics are many, and all of them are problematic. In a simplified formula, "Pragmatics is the study of those aspects of meaning not captured by semantic theory." (Levinson, p. 12). This definition contains a paradox, since semantics is supposed to be the study of meaning, but the paradox obliges us to re-consider the notion of meaning itself. The most interesting thing that pragmatics reveals, to me, is that the production of meaning goes beyond formal, logical and syntactic relationships. Meaning has something, maybe everything, to do with the relationships between the human beings that use the language.

The main contribution to the re-definition of meaning so as to cover its aspects derived from the larger, extra-linguistic context of communication is that of H.P. Grice who, in a series of articles, attracted attention to what happens to semantic meaning when language

is being used. According to Grice, there are two kinds of meaning: the semantic, abstract one, and the one intended by the speaker. But in order to become meaningful, the speaker's intention has to be recognized as such by the receiver of the message. No communicative intention can be fulfilled unless it is recognized as that specific communicative intention. In a further exploration of meaning, Grice shows that communication is based on some general principles which he calls maxims of conversation: the co-operative principle, the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relevance, and the maxim of manner. (Levinson, p. 101) These maxims are not always respected; on the contrary, they are most of the time flouted, but their pre-supposed existence enables the receivers of the message to recognize the intentions of the speaker.

Grice's theory reveals the important role that the second party, the receiver, plays in the process of communication, and together with Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, it has inspired researchers to study the balance between the participants in the act of communication. In my opinion its implications can go even further. The beginnings of linguistic theory (Saussure) concentrated mainly on the abstract code of the language. Later developments (Frege) connected the language with the speakers, but "speaker" was understood exclusively as the sender of the message. The receiver was supposed to be passive, to be just a decoder. Beyond stressing the reciprocity between sender and receiver, Grice's theory may give enough reason to suggest that meaning is produced at the receiver's end rather than by the speaker. The receiver, in this case should be understood as collective, or as what Wittgenstein calls "human custom and institution."

Grice's maxims of conversations are, of course, culture bound. A ceremonial exchange in a muslim country would do very badly for the maxims of relevance, quantity, or quality, and it would be equally hard to interpret as a deviation or flouting. The co-operative principle, however, may be at work in all cultures, and it may generate different sets of maxims. Within our culture, the maxims of conversation can be easily extended to the rules of composition, and it is fairly easy to convince our students of their necessity. As teachers we constitute for them the "human custom and institution," and we reinforce the values that have been transmitted to them by their parents, school, society in general. But what happens when our students come from another culture, go by another set of maxims of conversation which we ignore? Is it justifiable to eradicate their heritage and impose our culture instead?

Most of these students may become failures because they do not understand what is required of them, but more importantly because they cannot make us understand what they think. Even though both teacher and student speak English, communication is impaired, as if two languages were spoken. If failure is bad, success may be even worse. For the causes of failure receive a certain amount of attention from reserch scholars, but few people may question the way the success has been achieved. Little do we care that the succesful students have had to give up their values, habits of thought, their ways of expression, and with those, part of their creativity.

The problem of culturally different students is not new in the U.S., and it is more acute in elementary schools than in colleges. Ways with Words by S. Brice Heath, the result of years of research in

two communities of Piedmont Carolinas, reveals that the role of language, reading and writing in these communities is not only different from one another, but deeply rooted in their way of life, beliefs and customs. The inhabitants of Roadville, a white community of mill workers, value truth to the point of forbidding their children to tell any kind of story under the accusation of lying, whereas in Trackton, a black community of miners, making up stories is a way of life. Both communities differ from mainstream American society where truth and fantasy are contrastively defined and consequently discriminated in usage. This is the most striking difference between the two communities, but there are many others. The understanding of these "ways with words" enabled some teachers to experiment with their difficult students with good results. However, Heath's book ends on a note of disappointment: social and economic factors which make reading and writing of little use in these communities worked against the success of the isolated experiments.

Heath's research reveals two things: that an understanding of the students' background can help us reach to them; and that a cultural heritage can be translated into the terms of the school's standards rather than being completely eradicated. The experimental projects showed that students performed better when they could make themselves understood, and when they were led to discover scientific concepts by translating common language into the language of science.

At the college level, we have some advantages by comparison with the teachers experimenting in the Carolinas; the economic and social motivation is on our side, since by coming to college, the students have committed themselves to intellectual development, by which we

mean the adherence to our code. However, we have the disadvantage of dealing with a very heterogenous mass of students whose background we do not have the leisure to research. Communication between teacher and student may be very difficult sometimes. Our common attitude as teachers is based, unconsciously, on a Saussurian view of language: we see it as a code or a medium which, if properly mastered, ensures communication. Little are we aware of the fact that we are not only handing down a code through which the meaning gets transmitted, but, like Grice's receiver of the message, we determine the meaning of what the students have to say, and that, because we are not able to recognize their intentions, we may silence their message. Attentive to what we give, we neglect what is given to us. Many of our students resist our teaching because their ways are different. We perceive this difference as incorrect, substandard, bad language, and sometimes we do not hesitate to call it so. In many ways, we are like the well meaning missionaries of colonial times who took upon themselves to convert the "savages."

Surprisingly, the least resistant are the recent immigrants, whatever their origin. Immigrants, especially the recent ones, have a strong awareness of their own culture, and they are often in the habit of translating their thoughts from their own language into English. When they first learn English this seems to be the main deterrant, but it is probably this awareness and the ability to translate that makes them able to conform to our standards later. Conscious that their culture is different, they adapt, they translate their concepts into ours, without having to give up their way of thinking. The habit of translating is familiar to them. And although we insist that ESL

students should try to think in English instead of translating, there is a more profound process of translation that should be encouraged, that of translating their cultural heritage.

The most resistant to our pressures are the Black American students, especially those who have never been aware that they belong to another culture. They are rarely told that they speak another language, for we call their English incorrect or substandard. Consequently, they need to be made aware not only that they can translate, but that they have something to translate.

My experience with Black American students has taught me that the attempt to correct their grammar may be counterproductive. They usually learn the rules and solve the exercises perfectly, but they rarely apply this knowledge when they write. Moreover, too much insistence on the grammar may discourage them from writing altogether. It is more efficient to correct their grammar errors in a text they have produced, because this gives the possibility to negotiate their meaning. This implies, of course, that both writer and reader are present and discuss the text.

But the problems that arise from cultural differences are not only those related to grammar. On the contrary, the source of such problems may be the way people of different backgrounds conceive of the function, the usage, and the beauty of language. Language is a complex phenomenon profoundly interrealted with the way we think about the world, the way we judge and value things. To speak a language means to belong to a culture and to have an identity. When we try to make students write correctly without warning them about these differences, we may change a whole complex of beliefs, values and

habits of the mind, and this may affect profoundly their sense of identity. The question is, do we have the right to ask for such a change? And if we do, can the change be done only by eradicating the old and replacing it with the new? Or can we learn something in our turn? Perhaps the way to better teaching is to let ourselves be taught to a certain extent, to accept as much as to offer, to educate better writers by becoming more receptive readers.

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The Maxims of Conversation.

Grice identifies four basic maxims of conversation or general principles underlying the efficient co-operative use of language, which jointly express a general co-operative principle. These principles are expressed as follows:

The co-operative principle: make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The maxim of Quality: try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically; (i) do not say what you believe to be false

(ii) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of Quantity: (i) make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange

(ii) do not make your contribution more informative than is required

The maxim of Relevance: make your contribution relevant

The maxim of Manner: be perspicuous, and specifically:

(i) avoid obscurity

(ii) avoid ambiguity

(iii) be brief

(iv) be orderly